

other records, verify statistical reports for accuracy and completeness, handle and adjust customer complaints, make travel arrangements, take inventory of equipment and supplies, answer questions on departmental services and functions, or help prepare invoices or budgetary requests. Senior office clerks may be expected to monitor and direct the work of lower level clerks.

Working Conditions

For the most part, working conditions for office clerks are the same as those for other office employees within the same company. Those on a full-time schedule usually work a standard 40-hour week; however, some work shifts or overtime during busy periods. About 1 in 3 works part-time, whereas many other office clerks work as temporary workers.

Employment

Office clerks held about 3,021,000 jobs in 1998. Most are employed in relatively small businesses. Although they work in every sector of the economy, almost 60 percent worked in the services or wholesale and retail trade industries.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Although most office clerk jobs are entry level administrative support positions, some previous office or business experience may be needed. Employers usually require a high school diploma, and some require typing, basic computer skills, and other general office skills. Familiarity with computer word processing software and applications is becoming increasingly important.

Training for this occupation is available through business education programs offered in high schools, community and junior colleges, and postsecondary vocational schools. Courses in word processing, other computer applications, and office practices are particularly helpful.

Because office clerks usually work with other office staff, they should be cooperative and able to work as part of a team. In addition, they should have good communication skills, be detail-oriented, and adaptable.

General office clerks who exhibit strong communication, interpersonal, and analytical skills may be promoted to supervisory positions. Others may move into different, more senior clerical or administrative jobs, such as receptionist, secretary, and administrative assistant. After gaining some work experience or specialized skills, many workers transfer to jobs with higher pay or greater advancement potential. Advancement to professional occupations within an establishment normally requires additional formal education, such as a college degree.

Job Outlook

Plentiful job opportunities are expected for general office clerks due to employment growth, the large size of the occupation, and turnover. Furthermore, growth in part-time and temporary clerical positions will lead to a large number of job openings. Prospects should be brightest for those who have knowledge of basic computer applications and office machinery, such as fax machines and copiers.

Employment of general office clerks is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations through 2008. The employment outlook for office clerks will be affected by the increasing use of computers, expanding office automation, and the consolidation of clerical tasks. Automation has led to productivity gains, allowing a wide variety of duties to be performed by few office workers. However, automation also has led to a consolidation of clerical staffs and a diversification of job responsibilities. This consolidation increases the demand for general office clerks, because they perform a variety of clerical tasks. It will become increasingly common within small businesses to find a single general office clerk in charge of all clerical work.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of full-time office clerks were \$19,580 in 1998; the middle 50 percent earned between \$15,210 and \$24,370 annually.

Ten percent earned less than \$12,570, and 10 percent more than \$30,740. Median annual salaries in the industries employing the largest number of office clerks in 1997 are shown below:

Local government, except education and hospitals	\$20,300
State government, except education and hospitals	20,100
Hospitals	19,400
Colleges and universities	18,600
Personnel supply services	16,700

In early 1999, the Federal Government paid office clerks a starting salary of between \$13,400 and \$18,400 a year, depending on education and experience. Office clerks employed by the Federal Government earned an average annual salary of about \$28,100 in 1999.

Related Occupations

The duties of office clerks can include a combination of bookkeeping, typing, office machine operation, and filing; other administrative support workers who perform similar duties include information clerks and records processing clerks. Nonclerical entry-level jobs include cashier, medical assistant, teacher aide, and food and beverage service worker.

Sources of Additional Information

State employment service offices and agencies can provide information about job openings for general office clerks.

Postal Clerks and Mail Carriers

(O*NET 57305, 57308, and 58028)

Significant Points

- Relatively few people become postal clerks or mail carriers as their first jobs.
- Qualification is based on an examination.
- Because of the large number of qualified applicants, keen competition is expected.

Nature of the Work

Each week, the U.S. Postal Service delivers billions of pieces of mail, including letters, bills, advertisements, and packages. To do this in an efficient and timely manner, the Postal Service employs about 900,000 individuals, almost two-thirds of whom are postal clerks or mail carriers. Postal clerks wait on customers and ensure that mail is properly collected, sorted, and paid for, whereas mail carriers deliver mail to urban and rural residences and businesses throughout the United States.

Postal clerks, who are typically classified by job duties, perform a variety of functions in the Nation's post offices. Those who work as window or counter clerks, for example, sell stamps, money orders, postal stationery, and mailing envelopes and boxes. They also weigh packages to determine postage and check that packages are in satisfactory condition for mailing. These clerks register, certify, and insure mail and answer questions about postage rates, post office boxes, mailing restrictions, and other postal matters. Window and counter clerks also help customers file claims for damaged packages.

Postal clerks known as distribution clerks sort local mail for delivery to individual customers. A growing proportion of distribution clerks are known as mail processors and operate optical character readers (OCRs) and bar code sorters to arrange mail according to destination. OCRs "read" the ZIP code and spray a bar code onto the mail. Bar code sorters then scan the code and sort the mail. Because this is significantly faster than older sorting methods, it is becoming the standard sorting technology in mail processing centers.

Nevertheless, a number of distribution clerks still operate old electronic letter-sorting machines in some locations. These clerks push keys corresponding to the ZIP code of the local post office to



Despite increasing automation, some postal clerks still spend considerable time sorting mail by hand.

which each letter will be delivered. The machine then drops the letter into the proper slot. Still other clerks sort odd-sized letters, magazines, and newspapers by hand. In small post offices, some clerks perform all of the functions listed above.

Once clerks have processed and sorted the mail, it is ready to be delivered by mail carriers. Although carriers are classified by their type of route—either city or rural—duties of city and rural carriers are similar. Most travel established routes, delivering and collecting mail. Mail carriers start work at the post office early in the morning, where they arrange the mail in delivery sequence. Recently, automated equipment has reduced the time carriers need to sort the mail, allowing them to spend more time delivering mail.

Mail carriers cover their routes on foot, by vehicle, or a combination of both. On foot, they carry a heavy load of mail in a satchel or push it on a cart. In some urban and most rural areas, they use a car or small truck. Although the Postal Service provides vehicles to city carriers, most rural carriers have to use their own automobiles. Deliveries are made house-to-house, to roadside mailboxes, and to large buildings, such as offices or apartments, which generally have all the mailboxes at one location.

Besides delivering and collecting mail, carriers collect money for postage-due and COD (cash on delivery) fees and obtain signed receipts for registered, certified, and insured mail. If a customer is not home, the carrier leaves a notice that tells where special mail is being held. After completing their routes, carriers return to the post office with mail gathered from street collection boxes, homes, and businesses and turn in the mail, receipts, and money collected during the day.

The duties of some city carriers can be specialized, with some delivering only parcel post, whereas others pick up mail from mail collection boxes. In contrast to city carriers, rural carriers provide a wider range of postal services, in addition to delivering and picking up mail. For example, rural carriers may sell stamps and money orders and register, certify, and insure parcels and letters. All carriers, however, must be able to answer customers' questions about postal regulations and services and provide change-of-address cards and other postal forms when requested.

Working Conditions

Window clerks usually work in the public portion of clean, well-ventilated, and well-lit buildings. They have a variety of duties and frequent contact with the public, but they rarely work at night. However, they may have to deal with upset customers, stand for long periods, and are held accountable for an assigned stock of stamps and funds. Depending on the size of the post office in which they work, they may be required to perform sorting, as well.

The working conditions of other postal clerks can vary. In small post offices, clerks may sort mail by hand. In large post offices and mail processing centers, chutes and conveyors move the mail, and machines do much of the sorting. Despite the use of automated equipment, the work of postal clerks can be physically demanding. These workers are usually on their feet, reaching for sacks and trays of mail or placing packages and bundles into sacks and trays.

Mail distribution clerks can become tired and bored with the endless routine of moving and sorting mail. Many work at night or on weekends, because most large post offices process mail around the clock, and the largest volume of mail is sorted during the evening and night shifts. Workers can experience stress, as they process ever-larger quantities of mail under tight production deadlines and quotas.

Most carriers begin work early in the morning—those with routes in a business district can start as early as 4 a.m. Overtime hours are frequently required for urban carriers during peak delivery times, such as before the winter holidays. A carrier's schedule has its advantages, however. Carriers who begin work early in the morning are through by early afternoon and spend most of the day on their own, relatively free from direct supervision. Carriers spend most of their time outdoors, delivering mail in all kinds of weather. Even those who drive often must walk periodically when making deliveries and must lift heavy sacks of parcel post items when loading their vehicles. In addition, carriers must be cautious of potential hazards on their routes. Wet and icy roads and sidewalks can be treacherous, and each year numerous carriers are attacked by dogs.

Employment

The U.S. Postal Service employed 299,000 clerks and 332,000 mail carriers in 1998. About 95 percent of them worked full time. Most postal clerks provided window service and sorted mail at major metropolitan post offices, whereas some postal clerks worked at mail processing centers in mail distribution. Although the majority of mail carriers worked in cities and suburbs, about 53,000 were career rural carriers.

Postal clerks and mail carriers are classified as casual, part-time flexible, part-time regular, or full time. Casuals are hired for 90 days at a time to help process and deliver mail, during peak mailing or vacation periods. Part-time flexible workers do not have a regular work schedule or weekly guarantee of hours but are called in as the need arises. Part-time regulars have a set work schedule of fewer than 40 hours per week, often replacing regular full-time workers on their scheduled day off. Full-time postal employees work a 40-hour week over a 5-day period.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Postal clerks and mail carriers must be at least 18 years old and U.S. citizens or have been granted permanent resident-alien status in the

United States. Qualification is based on a written examination that measures speed and accuracy at checking names and numbers and the ability to memorize mail distribution procedures. Applicants must pass a physical examination and drug test, as well, and may be asked to show that they can lift and handle mail sacks weighing 70 pounds. Applicants for mail carrier positions must have a driver's license, a good driving record, and receive a passing grade on a road test.

Jobseekers should contact the post office or mail processing center where they wish to work to determine when an exam will be given. Applicants' names are listed in order of their examination scores. Five points are added to the score of an honorably discharged veteran and 10 points to the score of a veteran who was wounded in combat or is disabled. When a vacancy occurs, the appointing officer chooses one of the top three applicants; the rest of the names remain on the list to be considered for future openings until their eligibility expires—usually 2 years after the examination date.

Relatively few people become postal clerks or mail carriers as their first job, because of keen competition and the customary waiting period of 1-2 years or more after passing the examination. It is not surprising, therefore, that most entrants transfer from other occupations.

New postal clerks are trained on the job by experienced workers. Many post offices offer classroom instruction on safety and defensive driving. Workers receive additional instruction, when new equipment or procedures are introduced. In these cases, workers usually are trained by another postal employee or a training specialist.

Window clerks and mail carriers should be courteous and tactful when dealing with the public, especially when answering questions or receiving complaints. A good memory and the ability to read rapidly and accurately are important. Good interpersonal skills are also vital, because mail distribution clerks work closely with other clerks, frequently under the tension and strain of meeting dispatch or transportation deadlines and quotas.

Postal clerks and mail carriers often begin on a part-time, flexible basis and become regular or full time, in order of seniority as vacancies occur. Full-time clerks may bid for preferred assignments, such as the day shift or a high level nonsupervisory position. Carriers can look forward to obtaining preferred routes, as their seniority increases or to getting high level jobs, such as carrier technician. Both clerks and carriers can advance to supervisory positions on a competitive basis.

Job Outlook

Those seeking jobs as postal clerks and mail carriers can expect to encounter keen competition, because the number of applicants will continue to exceed the number of openings. Employment of postal clerks and mail carriers is expected to increase more slowly than the average for all occupations through 2008. However, some jobs will become available because of the need to replace those who retire or stop working for other reasons.

Although efforts by the U.S. Postal Service to provide better service will increase the number of window clerks, the demand for window clerks will be offset by the use of electronic communications technologies and private delivery companies. Employment growth among distribution clerks will be slowed by the increasing use of automated materials handling equipment and optical character readers, bar code sorters, and other automated sorting equipment. However, despite greater use of productivity-increasing machinery, the expected increase in mail volume will require additional clerks.

Other conflicting factors are expected to influence demand for mail carriers. The competition from alternative delivery systems and new forms of electronic communication will not affect the volume of mail handled by the U.S. Postal Service. In fact, mail volume is expected to continue to increase, as population growth and partnerships with express delivery companies stimulate demand for mail delivery. However, increased use of the "delivery point sequencing" system, which allows machines to sort mail directly to the order of delivery, should decrease the amount of time carriers spend sorting their mail, allowing them more time to handle long routes. In addition, the Postal Service is

moving toward more centralized mail delivery, such as the increased use of cluster boxes, to cut down on the number of door-to-door deliveries. These trends are expected to increase carrier productivity and lead to slower-than-average growth for these workers.

Employment and schedules in the Postal Service fluctuate with the demand for its services. When mail volume is high, full-time clerks and carriers work overtime, part-time clerks and carriers work additional hours, and casual clerks and carriers may be hired. When mail volume is low, overtime is curtailed, part-timers work fewer hours, and casual workers are discharged.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of postal mail carriers were \$34,840 in 1998. The middle 50 percent earned between \$30,430 and \$37,950. The lowest 10 percent had earnings of less than \$26,040, while the top 10 percent earned over \$39,820. Median annual earnings of postal service clerks were \$35,100 in 1998. The middle 50 percent earned between \$32,140 and \$37,580. The lowest 10 percent had earnings of less than \$25,350, while the top 10 percent earned more than \$39,070.

Postal workers enjoy a variety of employer-provided benefits similar to those enjoyed by Federal Government workers. The American Postal Workers Union or the National Association of Letter Carriers, both of which are affiliated with the AFL-CIO, represent most of these workers.

Related Occupations

Other workers whose duties are related to those of postal clerks include mail handlers, who unload the sacks of incoming mail and separate letters, parcel post, magazines, and newspapers. In addition, file clerks, routing clerks, sorters, material moving equipment operators, clerk typists, cashiers, and data entry operators do similar work. Others with duties related to those of mail carriers include messengers, merchandise deliverers, and delivery-route truckdrivers.

Sources of Additional Information

Local post offices and State employment service offices can supply details about entrance examinations and specific employment opportunities for postal clerks and mail carriers.

Records Processing Occupations

Significant Points

- Most jobs require only a high school diploma.
- Numerous job opportunities should arise due to high turnover in this occupation.
- Little or no change is expected in overall employment, reflecting the spread of computers and other office automation as well as organizational restructuring.

Nature of the Work

Without the assistance of workers in records processing occupations, many organizations would be lost. These workers maintain, update, and process a variety of records, ranging from payrolls to information on the shipment of goods or bank statements. They ensure that other workers get paid on time, customers' questions are answered, and records are kept of all transactions. (Additional information about specific records processing occupations appears in separate statements that follow this introductory statement.)

Depending on their specific titles, these workers perform a wide variety of recordkeeping duties. *Billing clerks and billing machine operators*, for example, prepare bills and invoices. *Bookkeeping*,